

# What Teacher Collaboration Looks Like



BY JOSEPH VINCENTE

So, 300 homework assignments checked, 200 emails replied to, 100 quizzes graded, 50 more lab reports left from Monday still to read, 30 lessons executed, 10 revised notebook entries regraded, five phone calls and texts made to check in with parents, four curriculum maps revised, three extra-help sessions held before and after school and during lunch, two pep-talks with students about their college aspirations, and one mediation between quarreling best friends conducted.

Phew.

I take a deep breath and do a bit of mindless silent cleaning and organizing in my classroom to decompress. Another exhausting week in the life of a high school teacher comes to a close. Must be time for the weekend, right? Well, almost.

Friday afternoon at my school is when we do some of our most demanding but essential work as teachers. You may be thinking it's time for the dreaded weekly professional development meetings or for some "collaboration." Yes, that's right, but at East Side Community High School in New York City, a sixth- to 12th-grade college-preparatory public school where I teach 10th-grade chemistry, collaboration

isn't just an activity or being friendly, respectful, or cooperative with colleagues. Rather, collaboration underpins how we structure and conduct most of our work, how we serve students, and how we learn and grow as professionals. In the next few paragraphs, I describe some of East Side's collaborative structures as well as the norms and conditions that support them.

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At East Side, I work with a "grade team" that shares a cohort of students. This allows me, the 10th-grade science teacher, to have powerful conversations with the history, math, and English teachers who teach the same students.

Throughout the year at daily "kid talk" meetings, we compare successes and struggles across subject areas by discussing the varying strengths and needs of our students. At these meetings, we look deeply at student data and write "smileys"—postcards commending students for improvement or great work. After that, we may brainstorm academic interventions for struggling students, such as mandating afterschool tutoring, reviewing individualized education plan supports, or sharing successful strategies particular to a student. We also consider a spectrum of students' social-emotional needs through counseling referrals or extracurricular activity recommendations.

Grade teams are organized into smaller advisory classes, in which teachers advise small groups of students, that also meet at the start and end of each day for a five-minute check-in and twice a week for

longer lessons. And grade teams work together to design the advisory class curriculum that is taught in those longer advisory lessons, which cover everything from health and healthy relationships, to college and career preparation, academic support, discussion of current events, and more.

In these ways, the grade team structure allows each individual teacher to leverage the collective expertise of a group of close colleagues all striving to serve the same group of students and forge authentic relationships with them.

"Vertical teams" are another vehicle for teacher collaboration at East Side. These teams include all same-subject teachers—in my case, all science teachers—within the school. I personally look forward to science meetings because I know the work we do as a sixth- to 12th-grade science team benefits us all.

Over my nine years of teaching, we have had reiterative discussions to articulate curriculum. It is incredibly powerful to sit in a room full of other science educators who are designing curricular materials that leverage the instruction of teachers in preceding grade levels and that intentionally feed into the following year's work. I know that the ninth- and 11th-grade science teachers who flank my chemistry class are depending on me to pick up where they left off or pave the way for more advanced work in the upcoming year.

Vertical teams meet about once or twice a month to set schoolwide instructional goals, develop common language, reflect

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on pedagogy, test-drive new lesson ideas, discuss new reads in their subjects, share lesson materials, collectively design rubrics, and honestly critique our interdependent curricula. The kind of mutual accountability that vertical teams create seems more authentic to me than other attempts to standardize accountability and assessment. It feels like I answer more directly to our students and to my colleagues as we all drive toward the same set goals.

A third collaborative structure at East Side is “professional learning groups” (PLGs), which are organized around shared professional development interests, needs, or themes. Though we have been experimenting with the exact design of PLGs for a few years, they have evolved to focus on peer observation and feedback. Belonging to a community where high-level pedagogical teacher-to-teacher talk is nurtured motivates and challenges me to attempt new instructional strategies. This is an example of how collaboration can support innovation. PLGs provide the space that teachers need to try out new teaching techniques and refine them. PLGs are especially useful when master teachers model strategies and other peers provide nonevaluative feedback.

Finally, “roundtables” are another collaborative hallmark at East Side. Twice a year in each grade (at the end of each semester), students present their choice of best work from each class. Roundtables are special because, beyond celebrating their work, students must also demonstrate on demand what they have learned throughout the semester. They often present to outside guests, such as parents, scientists, mathematicians, historians, writers, professionals from a variety of fields, college professors, and educators from other middle and high schools. All staff members at the school also serve as roundtable judges, and this builds trust as my colleagues evaluate what my students have learned. In such an authentic system of assessment, collaboration is a critical part of planning for and providing feedback on each other’s roundtables.

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As with all relationships, sometimes it’s the small things that matter the most. Much of the crucial work done during the meetings described above depends on the smaller interactions that occur daily among teachers, way before they sit next to each other to work together formally. And in many cases, it’s not even what you do, but how you do it, that counts.

When you take time to simply listen—

maybe not even give advice, but just truly hear another colleague—it can build the trust necessary for future joint work. For example, you build trust when you listen to the new science teacher on your team who vents about a lesson that went well in one block but crashed in another. Those small moments can plant the seeds for meaningful collaboration. That new teacher might have an administrator to help him or her formally, but the idea that a peer can also provide support through nonjudgmental listening creates professional friendships that set the foundation for us to work together authentically in other contexts.

In my experience, genuine trust and sustained professional friendships lead to increased teacher and student learning.

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Being able to visit a colleague’s classroom because I know he or she is really strong at facilitating rich classroom discussion, routinely being asked to share student work across grades or disciplines, and regularly meeting to discuss the needs of a cohort of shared students—these are all examples of structures stemming from a school culture where collaboration isn’t one activity, or something we do during a designated day and time, but rather, it’s the way we do everything.

Throughout my career, strong relationships with peers have enriched my efforts to grow as a teacher. And it looks like I am not alone; research shows<sup>1</sup> that collaboration can be directly linked to both teacher improvement and student achievement.\*

Some of the structures described above—grade teams, vertical teams, PLGs, and roundtables—may be similar in name to what other schools across the country do. What I believe makes my school’s structures especially authentic and effective is their focus on rigorous project- and portfolio-based work. East Side is one of a growing number of New York

\*For more on how collaboration can strengthen education, see the Winter 2013–2014 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/winter2013-2014](http://www.aft.org/ae/winter2013-2014).

Performance Standards Consortium schools,<sup>†</sup> mainly in New York City, where students complete capstone projects, known as performance-based assessment tasks, in each subject area to meet their graduation requirements.

Consortium schools gather regularly to hold each other accountable through “moderation studies,” in which many schools get together to blindly study, score, and provide feedback on other schools’ performance-based assessment tasks. We tend to be very tough on each other’s work, but in a professional, constructive way that spurs each of us to return to our schools and raise the level of our work. Interschool collaboration can be a powerful way for teachers to share ideas relating

to curriculum and instruction, inspiring us to work harder in the context of our own schools’ individual contexts, needs, and student populations. In addition, the sharing of student work within and across schools provides a larger sense of professional community.

Teachers and schools cannot create and sustain this collaborative, interdependent culture on their own. Policies and incentives must encourage trust among teachers and among teacher teams. At a minimum, existing policies shouldn’t get in the way of collaboration and coordination, as might be the case in other schools. If, at the end of the day, my students and I are judged primarily on a single exam score from a single day, I imagine this could inevitably breed isolation and an unhealthy competitiveness among teachers, and in the long run, fail to foster collaboration as a way of doing things.

### Endnote

1. See Esther Quintero, ed., *Teaching in Context: The Social Side of Education Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2017).

<sup>†</sup>For more on the New York Performance Standards Consortium, see “Putting the Focus on Student Engagement” in the Spring 2016 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/spring2016/barlowe-and-cook](http://www.aft.org/ae/spring2016/barlowe-and-cook).